



African ecologies: the value and politics of indigenous knowledges—introduction

Adriaan van Klinken*,¹ Simon Manda¹, Damaris Parsitau¹ and Abel Ugba¹

ABSTRACT

This article offers an introduction to the special section about the theme of ‘African ecologies and indigenous knowledges’. It explores the interest of scholars, policy makers and activists in indigenous knowledges as a resource for addressing global challenges, particularly the challenges in relation to the environment and climate change in contemporary Africa. Reviewing current literature and discourse on the subject, this Introduction foregrounds the considerable political, epistemological and methodological significance of indigenous knowledges, especially in the light of ongoing debates about decolonisation, and it highlights their relevance for understanding African ecologies. It further introduces the three articles included in this special section, embedding them in broader fields of scholarship. (This article is published in the thematic collection ‘African ecologies: the value and politics of indigenous knowledges’, edited by Adriaan van Klinken, Simon Manda, Damaris Parsitau and Abel Ugba.)

Keywords Africa, ecology, environment, indigenous knowledge, decolonisation

In recent years, indigenous knowledge has been increasingly recognised as a potential resource for addressing global challenges as captured in the UN-led agendas of the Millennium Development Goals and the subsequent Sustainable Development Goals (UN n.d., Bredlid & Krøvel 2020). One of the key areas in which indigenous knowledge finds a particular relevance and significance is the challenges relating to the natural environment, in particular the challenges of local communities facing serious vulnerabilities to adapt to climate and environmental change. Thus, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in its 2022 report, argued that the rapidly escalating climate impacts and increasing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, partly due to the failure of climate mitigation, have led to an increased need for climate adaptation measures worldwide that integrate what it calls ‘indigenous local knowledge and citizen science’ (IPCC 2022). The IPCC highlighted new intellectual ground that recognises the value of diverse forms of knowledge, including ILK (indigenous and local knowledge) in understanding and evaluating climate adaptation processes and actions to reduce risks from human-induced climate change as pathway to climate justice.¹

Indigenous knowledge is seen as a valuable resource for communities to mitigate resiliently and respond adequately to the multiple effects and impacts of

¹Justice points to ‘three principles: distributive justice which refers to the allocation of burdens and benefits among individuals, nations and generations; procedural justice which refers to who decides and participates in decision-making; and recognition which entails basic respect and robust engagement with and fair consideration of diverse cultures and perspectives’ (IPCC 2022: 7).

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* E-mail: a.vanklinken@leeds.ac.uk

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environmental and climate change. As a source of wisdom for humankind more generally, indigenous knowledge offers an archive of insights and attitudes that help us to inhabit the earth and relate to its multiple species in more harmonious and respectful ways. According to the UN Environment Programme,

There's a growing realization among environmental advocates that the spread of indigenous practices is also crucial to the planet's future. An emerging body of research suggests that traditional techniques, some millennia old, for growing food, controlling wildfires and conserving endangered species could help arrest the dramatic decline of the natural world (UNEP, n.d.).

As such, indigenous knowledges can also be considered as offering an alternative to the capitalist modes of natural resource exploitation, including subjugation of non-human species (for example, enclosures), and accumulation of wealth for a small part of the human community, which has come to characterise the Anthropocene. According to Inoue & Moreira (2016: 1, 16), 'indigenous knowledge uncovers many ways to consider nature and contributes to recast global environmental studies in the Anthropocene', especially by bringing about 'a more holistic worldview, so helping to overcome the dichotomies of modernity'. The decolonial potential of indigenous knowledges is also increasingly recognised, as it decentres Eurocentric perspectives and worldviews and foregrounds the pluriversity of ways of knowing, making sense of and relating to, the world (Doxtater 2004; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Falola 2022).

As part of this ever-growing body of academic and policy discourse about indigenous knowledges, there is an emerging body of literature about indigenous knowledges and ecology specifically in Africa. Across the African continent, local communities have been greatly affected by ongoing histories of (neo-)colonial subjugation and capitalist exploitation, and by the enormous social, cultural and political changes brought about in the name of modernity. In the process, indigenous knowledges have been marginalised, but have not been completely lost. To date, the livelihood of many of these communities—largely dependent on the natural environment—is severely threatened by the effects of environmental degradation and climate change, while their ability to cope with the associated socio-economic risks is limited due to their political marginalisation (Dube *et al.* 2016; Singh *et al.* 2020). Hence, activists, scholars, and increasingly also governmental and non-governmental agencies in Africa, are recognising the importance of African indigenous knowledges as a resource to those communities on the continent particularly in need of climate change mitigation and adaptation (Ebhuoma & Leonard 2022). Hence, there is a quest to collect, reconstruct and document indigenous knowledges—ranging from traditional wisdom captured in proverbs and myths, to ethics of environmental respect and preservation, such as through taboo systems, to cultures of forestry and fishery, to agricultural practices, etc.—to understand their ecological significance, and to mobilise this in the face of contemporary environmental challenges. An intellectual ground has equally been opened for an examination

of the actual application of indigenous knowledge and how such claims touch the ground in adapting communities.

At a conceptual level, there has been a discussion about the limitations of the notion of ‘indigenous knowledge’, with some scholars warning that the term ‘tends to be represented as an unchanging product of “culture” and “tradition”, passed down from ancestors, and often tied to a specific place’ (Green 2014: 39). The alternative term of ‘Africa-centred knowledges’ has been proposed to scholars working in African contexts, to signal that indigenous knowledge on the continent is not static and does not exist in isolation, but is ‘entangled, contextual and contingent’ (Cooper & Morell 2014: 3). For the purpose of this special section, we sympathise and acknowledge the importance of these debates, which in themselves highlight the value and politics of the subject, but we do not aim to contribute to it as such. We observe that the term ‘indigenous knowledge’, and related terminology, such as ‘indigenous and local knowledge’ and ‘indigenous knowledge systems’, remains prevalent in scholarship and policy discourse and also continues to be relevant in disentangling local practices and how these relate to environmental sustainability. The reason for this prevalence is, probably, the important political, epistemological and methodological point made by the term ‘indigenous knowledge’, being that Africa and other regions of the so-called Global South have valuable perspectives and understandings on their own, which in the modern world might have become entangled with Eurocentric knowledges but which nevertheless remain recognisable as rooted in and shaped by particular local histories, traditions, cultures and worldviews.

This special thematic section complements an earlier thematic section about ‘African ecologies: literary, cultural, and religious perspectives’ published in this journal (Van Klinken *et al.* 2024). The present section presents three articles that, each in different ways, engage the intersection of indigenous knowledge and ecology in the current context of environmental and climate change and related challenges and risks to African communities. King’asia Mamati’s article, titled ‘Relational landscapes: environmental discourse and identity of the Sengwer community in Kenya’, offers an in-depth ethnographic account of indigenous knowledge among the Sengwer people in northwestern Kenya. It specifically examines ‘landscape narratives’ which elucidate the ways in which the Sengwer understand the relationship between humans and the natural environment. Mamati argues that for the Sengwer, the landscape is relational and spiritual, and he presents this as an alternative to the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, which is deeply rooted in Western thought. Fancy Cheronoh’s article, titled ‘Revisiting African indigenous eco-spirituality and eco-solidarity: an autobiographical case of totemism among the Kipsigis’, focuses on the Kipsigis community in southwestern Kenya. Drawing on the narrative methods of oral history and autobiography, Cheronoh reconstructs the belief in, and practice of, totemic taboos among the Kipsigis, and analyses how these taboos helped to maintain a balance between humans, other species and spirits, allowing for harmonious co-existence in the natural (but simultaneously, spiritual) environment. Acknowledging that much of this knowledge has been marginalised in Kenya, Cheronoh reflects autobiographically on the ways in

which it can be passed on to new generations living in modern, urban and Christianised settings. The thematic section concludes with an article by Simon Manda, co-authored with Chrispin Matenga, Anna Mdee, Ruth Smith and Elias Nkiaka, and titled ‘Challenges for expanding inventories of climate possibilities through indigenous and local knowledges in rural Zambia’. This article takes a critical approach to externally funded, community driven climate adaptation (CDCA) projects which, despite their name, in fact are donor-driven and fail to adequately engage with, and build on, indigenous and local knowledges. Based on multi-site empirical research on these projects in the Lozi-speaking region of western Zambia, the authors show how this failure hinders the effectiveness of climate-change adaptation policies in local communities. They make a strong case for a meaningful engagement with indigenous ecological knowledges as well as local political systems of the Lozi people, in order for climate change adaptation to be culturally sensitive and locally effective, including suggestions of how adaptation projects could be structured and organised to leverage material and lived aspects of human culture.

The articles in this special section (apart from that by Manda *et al.*), like the articles in the previous issue, were first presented as papers at a workshop on African Ecologies, convened by the editors of this special section, which took place on 29–31 July 2023 at the British Institute for Eastern Africa, in Nairobi, Kenya, in collaboration with the Leeds University Centre for African Studies. The workshop was funded under a British Academy Writing Workshop grant. At the workshop, the participants—early-career researchers from different parts of the continent—presented draft papers and received feedback from their peers as well as from senior academics and journal editors. They also received training in important academic skills, such as interdisciplinarity, peer review and grant application. Revised versions of the papers were subsequently also presented at a conference of the African Association for the Study of Religions, in panels on ‘Religion, Culture and Ecology in Africa’, which took place at the University of Nairobi, 2–4 August 2023. The article by Simon Manda *et al.* did not go through this process but was later solicited to complement this special section with a more policy- and practice-oriented study.

As we wrote in our previous Introduction, we reiterate here that during the Nairobi workshop, and as conveners and participants, we were reminded of the legendary work of the late Kenyan environmental activist, Wangari Maathai, with the trees she planted in Freedom Corner of Uhuru Park, in central Nairobi, still standing strong. The articles in this special section can be seen as a response to Maathai’s call for African communities to ‘deepen their sense of self-knowledge and realise that to care for the environment is to take care of themselves and their children—that in healing the earth they are healing themselves’ (Maathai 2009: 170). Critically, the African self-knowledge presented in these articles offers important insights into environmental care and responsibility beyond the continent too, as the wisdoms contained herein are universally significant.

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About the authors

Adriaan van Klinken is Professor of Religion and African Studies at the University of Leeds, and Extraordinary Professor in the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice at the University of the Western Cape. He also is a 2024 Research Fellow in the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study in South Africa. His research explores the intersections of religion, culture, and society in contemporary Africa. His publications include the book *Kenyan, Christian, Queer* (Penn State University Press, 2019), and the article 'Wangari Maathai's Environmental Bible' (*Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* (2020), 8(3): 156–75).

Simon Manda is Lecturer in Global Development in the School of Politics and International Studies at the University of Leeds, UK. His research includes work on climate change risks, environment and development, land politics and agrarian studies. Simon's current research integrates citizen science in policy practice. He recently co-authored *People or Property: Legal Contradictions, Climate Resettlement, and the View from Shifting Ground* (Springer, 2023), and authored 'Seeing like the state? Customary land pressures and fracturing tenure systems in rural Zambia' (with L. Banda, *Land Use Policy* (2020), 132: 106833). E-mail: s.manda@leeds.ac.uk

Damaris Parsitau is Associate Professor of Religion and Gender, and the Director of the Nagel Institute for the Study of World Christianity, at Calvin University, Grand Rapids, USA. She is also a Professor Extraordinaire at the University of South Africa and the University of the Western Cape in South Africa. Her research interests include Pentecostal/Evangelical churches and their intersections with gender, politics, civic and public engagement, and sexuality. She recently co-edited *The Routledge Handbook of Megachurches* (Routledge, 2022). E-mail: d.parsitau@leeds.ac.uk

Abel Ugba is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Leeds. His research interests cover migration, media, and religion and the nexus between them. His recent publications include the chapters 'Europe' in *The Routledge Handbook of Megachurches* (Routledge, 2022) and 'Migrant religions and the Irish state' in *The Study of Religions in Ireland—Past, Present and Future* (B. McNamara & H O'Brien (2022), Bloomsbury). E-mail: a.f.ugba@leeds.ac.uk